

Folk healers and herbal medicine

Making an effort to recover and record the experiences, skills and philosophy of the very last folk healers and women herbalists in the Maltese Islands is proving to be one of our most successful – and fruitful in terms of hours of recording – from our on-going projects. This collection of oral history recordings provide us with a wealth of knowledge on traditional medicine, the use of natural healing methods and the care of the body throughout the life cycle.

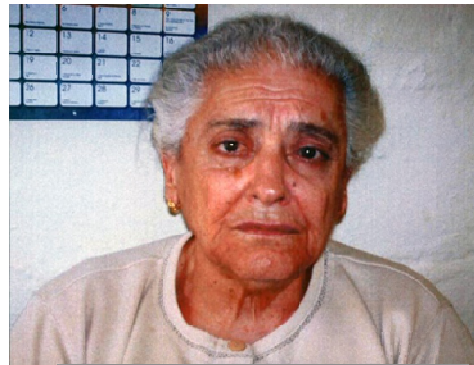
But perhaps even more importantly, these –mostly female –voices enlighten us on the essentials of prevention, care and healing as inseparable from our own perception and treatment of the body and of nature in which it is embedded. They discuss at length the organic ways of preventing illness and treatment through holistic practices, which have been passed on to them from previous generations. These, of course, are all issues which have started to be investigated in depth by medical historians and anthropologists, and which are becoming even more crucial at this point in time.

The women protagonists – *Sunta Apap*, *Lureta Camilleri* and *Emilia Muscat* – here speak with unique, authoritative, voices, frequently mentioning other popular herbalists or curers: their ‘sister healers’ such as *Kristina ‘Taz-Żebbuġ’*, *Karmni Grima* and *il-Lembija* or other less known members of their own household, clan or village, whose knowledge of the medical properties of certain plants and herbs, or of different healing practices, they still hold with pride.

The short passages selected here capture moments from these healer’s oral recollections and life experiences (or stories about them) which are immensely important for the history of natural medicine and health. But these are only few, short, excerpts from the extensive hours of recorded knowledge, vast practical wisdom and philosophy of life which these elderly women offer. All of them, in one way or another, discuss the healing effects of the wide range of garden plants and herbs as those found in the nearby fields, pathways or garigue, and the techniques employed in the picking, preservation-drying or otherwise. But they also make us aware of the negative, even poisonous, effects on health these could have if taken for the wrong purpose or haphazardly, picked in an inappropriate manner in the wrong season, or time of the day, or if badly compounded. All of them refer to the most prominent herbalist and healer in popular memory: *Frenċ tal-Għarb*, whose early distrust by the Catholic Church – due to his popularity in the villages – has been gradually smoothed, leading at present to his total acceptance as ‘saintly man’.

Sunta Apap: 'I used to visit the place where *Frenc tal-Għarb* lived to talk to him, and sometimes I found him. There used to be many people, they came from every village for remedies against ills and pains. He was very much known for healing but also to hear and counsel people. He also used to perform as a veterinary as well as advisor on matters of body and soul [...]. In his use herbs for medical purposes *Frenc tal-Għarb* would compound a delicate mixture of, for instance, fourteen herbs, to be used against traumas His sister learnt this herbal mix and used to do it also, but it was he who fixed other herbal medicine and especially creams against bone pains and arthritis...and more. *Frenc* kept on compounding medicine from plants and herbs for a very long time till his death. As I spent a period sleeping with them, for eight months.... when they took care of me... this was during his last days, I came to know of other women who used to be with him. Karmni Grima: she used to come to his place and prepared breakfast for him...she would come on a cart at half past eight in the morning on Sundays. It was a long time ago.'

Loreta Camilleri: 'When very young, my parents , especially my mother, made ample use of a lot of herbal medicine. My mother was always at *Frenc tal-Għarb* who was known to have healing powers and had great knowledge of natural remedies and ways of curing. He had healed many people from the villages with his medicine...so my mum used a lot of the same herbal fusions and persons came to her also. Later we started to make the same herbal medicine ourselves.



I tell the people today that someone should continue doing this when I cease and stop. However...I really don't know what the people will do when they come and I will not be able to provide them with what they require. I have that fridge [pointing to her refrigerator] which is only used for that purpose, I fill it up with different herbal mixtures and ointments so that I could give to those who come asking for one or the other herbal medicine. When some persons came and did not find what they were asking for, and when I told them that I won't have any even the week after, they just went mad and asked me time and again from where they could get hold of some ! I reasoned with them, saying 'When I will stop doing the medicine what are you going to do?' There are very few others who are knowledgeable about and who can really do these herbal fusions and it seems that nobody wants to continue in this line of ours because it involves a lot of work and thinking. You know ... a bottle of herbal medicine done once a week can take a whole day to produce. Frequently, and this especially in Summer, I have to wake up at half past four in the morning, to avoid the morning heat, and work in the cool early hours of the day ... so I will try to finish a little early as the process involves a lot of work. I have a cauldron and always have about twenty-six water bottles read for use...these are not too much and they will not last long. Sometimes I dedicate twice a week for this to supply the demand ... it means that the people are still believing in our 'remedies', in this type of natural herbal medicine and their curing effects. Many persons have come to plead to me personally, or else nowadays they phone me ... They say that they have been satisfied with the natural remedies which I provided to them ... found that these cured their bodies ... herbs are better than drugs.'

Anton Attard: 'I was living in Victoria, which means at the centre of [the island of] Gozo. At the time, paralyses was a major and worst illness found here. If you take a look at a newspaper of those times, you will read that a lot of children suffered from severe paralyses: meaning that they had their hands or feet paralysed stiff, dry up and become useless. It was a very serious disease. Today we know much about it but when I was a young lad there was very little knowledge and a person who contracted this disease was sure to have it for life and that's it !

Well there was *Frenċ tal-Għarb*, I think that I have to tell you that it was not only *Frenċ* who used herbal medicine but, even my father, for example, had some four herbal recipes which were not given to him by *Frenċ tal-Għarb* ... but by other farmers.

Farmers themselves knew about herbal medicine and used it very frequently as from time immemorial. For instance my father himself used to fry... what do they call it ... the rue [shrub] ! and then would spread its oil on that part of the body which was sore. He also used "*x'ħet ir-riħ*" by boiling it and spread against other pains..., cough drops to relieve a cough. The difference is that persons went to *Frenċ tal-Għarb* and he prescribed them a particular medicine which he prepared for their requirements, but I think that if persons came to them for help they would have provided them with this or that. It means that this knowledge was passed from the old to the younger farmers in time. Are you understanding me ? there was a myriad of recipes of suitable herbs, especially herbs like rue, grass and "*x'ħet ir-riħ*" and others that many used against specific pains and for particular remedies of the body such as aches in the bones and arthritis. Drinkable compounds were the most difficult to do and needed precision. Some had to contain alcohol and these were the more popular. Honey with lemon and whiskey, or hot wine, were two of the most popular and all knew about them...others needed more knowledge and skilful hands.

On the other hand, there were other healers of a different type such as, for instance, *Kristina taz-Żebbuġ*. Once I went to her not because I required her messaging but I knew someone who had sprained his arm and went to her to be healed ... and she did put it right ! *Kristina* was a strong woman ... in fact, to put this person's arm back to normal, she grasped it between her hands and manipulated it hard... dragged it with full strength and you could hear the bones cracking and sliding back in place. This means that I saw her doing this with my own eyes ... although, keep in mind, that *Kristina* was more specialised on bone adjustments rather than herbal medicine...she could handle any problems connected with the bone structure and gave messages as well. To be sure, the first thing she did was to see if the arm, or any other bone, was broken, because if it was she would not handle it, and he was advised to seek a doctor. This shows that she was not a person that abused others...that she was responsible. If, on the other hand, she saw that the bone was not in its right place, she would tell the persons that she was going to put it back in place... she would grip it with all her strength, manipulate it and place it back. She was a responsible person because if she thought that she was not competent enough she would refer the person seeking her help to the doctor or send him to the hospital.

There are two types of herbs, the ones that one finds in the fields ... in cultivated fields. Other herbs would be available only in the wild, grown in the natural wilderness ... for example, rue is to be found on the garigue ... in the meadows, can't be found in the fields.



The herbs which grow in the meadows, you need to go searching for them... such as thyme which one finds on rough garigue land on the hills.

Herbs like rosemary can be grown also in the garden, though I know



that in the past, it grew very much in the wild. One needs to know where to look for each one of these herbs and plants and how to pick them ... what herb you need and for what. For example if you were going to use small water melons ... this grew only in the



valleys. The important thing is that you have to recognize the plant or the herbs because these can be poisonous. In fact, some of the herbs are really dangerous so you need to know exactly what they look like and which ones are to be used.

Then, for example, leaves from the oleander tree are also poisonous .. if these leaves mixed with herbs and eaten by cows the latter will die for sure. I know of a case when a person's cow died as it ate herbs mixed with the oleander leaves. It means that the oleander leaves are very poisonous. Some plants and herbs could also have fatal consequences ... such as with pregnant women ... as they cause abortion. But on this I can't speak so much ... if they are effective or not you can only know if you use them One must always keep this in mind: a variety of plants and herbs can have very negative effect on your body !'

Emilia Muscat: 'During my childhood and my youth I knew of the potential for healing as well as the detriment that herbs can procure to your body due the fact that I lived on a farm with the pigs and the cows. I used to go herding and in the meantime cut and pick grass ... I still remember my mother saying "this is smooth sew-thistle , this is called wall flower or this and that". She loved the fields and used to make wine herself on the farm. So we were part of it all. As a girl, I hadn't been at home from the age of six upwards, which means that I did not continue being near my mother, and I still feel very sorry for that... because I know that I would have learnt so much more. I still remember my mother using herbs and plants as remedies for a variety of pains and afflictions...I recollect her picking and compounding mixed herbs in a sort of cream which we used against skin pimples. When one of us children had a bad wound she used to wash it properly in warm water with boiled herbs.

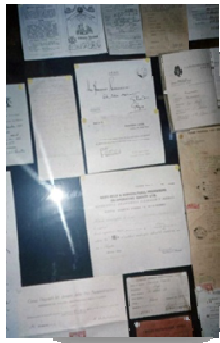
When I was a child I couldn't even identify celery from parsley ! This till I was nineteen years of age. But I do remember my mum using these plants and herbs as remedies for many conditions and ills. She also used them on the farm animals...the cows and the pigs especially. Usually for diarrhoea there was camomile, however my mother used this flower for other health problems. Today, through my studies, I came to know and use it for more. But I remember mother saying that to use camomile to cure diarrhoea one needed to fast for a time. On the other hand, someone tended to be constipated one had to use camomile infusion thicker than usual. I clearly recollect mum saying "Do me some camomile" and she

used to plant camomile so we would always have it in hand. I also had an aunty who lived in Tunisia. And she told us that the people there used a lot of herbs, both wild herbs and others grown in their gardens ... But when we were children we were always confused with these varieties and their use. At the time you needed money to buy medicine, but at the time you reverted to herbal medicine ... the doctor was already very expensive, so this was the more popular form of medicine here.

Then I remember *Frenċ tal-Għarb*. For me he was a saint, he had a special charisma from God, and he was talented to use herbs to heal persons. But before he ever gave the people his herbal medicine, he would tell them "Before you use this medicine or before drinking it you need to pray. Say three Ave Marias". He was ... a real healer both spiritually and in matters of the body. On one of these events, I remember my father was the first person who owned and drove a merchandise truck in Gozo ... he used to carry animals, loads of eggs and people together for the ferry [to Malta]. Only males used to go on the ferry at that



time ... Girls were prohibited from going on it and there were times when I had to put my brother's trousers and put my long hair under a hat, so that they think that I am a boy ! ... But women came to ask for directions to *Frenċ tal-Għarb* and my father was so kind.. he gave them a lift from there to *Ta' Pinu , Għarb ...*



Once my brother burnt his foot and we could see his bone skinless. At the hospital they told us that they wanted to keep him there to cure him and that there was the possibility that they could amputate his foot. When my father arrived from Malta, he rushed him to *Frenċ*



tal-Għarb. When he arrived, *Frenċ* prayed a lot over him and then he mixed herbs, I know he had got six, six herbs, he mixed. He put all in a bottle full of medicine...made sort of a cream and he filled the wound ... and he told us that two days later we needed to clean it with hot water and when it cooled down to fill it up again with the same medical cream. I still remember my mother doing this ...a miracle happened ! His foot healed... today there is still some bad

skin still showing but he walks on it ... God's will ! That was one of my childhood experiences. Then I know that *Frenċ tal-Għarb* had some women to help him mostly nearing the end of his life, because he was sick. There were four women that I remember: three from *Nadur* and another one from *Għarb* or *Għasri*. They used to help him much in many things. In fact when *Frenċ* died, they started assisting persons themselves. I remember that very clearly. Even when the authorities stopped *Frenċ* from continuing his healing and to see the people...this was very cruel...and he obeyed the Law, I still learnt a lot then.

I also still remember other persons apart from *Frenċ* who practiced herbal medicine. One of them was called *il-Lembija ta' Rumon* , yes she was the one who I already mentioned from *Għarb* or *Għasri*. I knew them well and spoke to them as they used to impress me a lot. *Il-Lembija* I remember well because she lived near us...so we saw her very often. My mother used to believe in her a lot. She was always at her home so I know her name well enough.

She is now dead. Once I went to her as a child ... as I was very inquisitive and I asked her "What do you do inside here ?" She replied: "You can't understand, I can't tell you". She also said that "this is a recipe by *Frenc tal-Gharb*". They always say that. Even when I spoke with another one from Nadur who is still alive, she replied "I can't tell you, these are secrets of *Frenc*."